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Cornflakes versus Conflict: an Interview with Bill Forsyth

Jonathan Murray

Although he has yet to make a movie during the twenty-first century, Bill Forsyth remains the best-known director to have emerged from Scotland. More generally, Forsyth is an important figure within recent British cinema history for a number of reasons. At a microcosmic level, the comic ingenuity, idiosyncratic narrative structures and tonal complexity of his eight features to date make him one of the most distinctive authorial voices to have emerged from late-twentieth-century Britain. In macrocosmic terms, the remarkable accomplishment and international critical success of Forsyth's late-1970s and early-1980s films rendered them an enduringly vital catalyst in the tentative emergence and subsequent ongoing expansion of an indigenous Scottish feature filmmaking tradition.

The second decade of the twenty-first century has been marked by an escalating degree of interest in revisiting and reassessing Forsyth's cinema. My 2011 monograph *Discomfort and Joy: The Cinema of Bill Forsyth* (Peter Lang) offers the first book-length exploration of the director's oeuvre. In 2010, the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography in New York staged a full career retrospective of Forsyth's features, with the filmmaker in attendance to discuss his work. More recently, in 2014 the British Film Institute made the original, undubbed version of Forsyth's debut feature, 1979's *That Sinking Feeling*, available for the first time on DVD. Moreover, if recent years have witnessed a collective eagerness to talk about Forsyth, the same period has also seen the director himself play a full and generous role within that ongoing conversation. One part of this process involved Forsyth's participation in a

ninety-minute public interview at the 2009 Edinburgh International Film Festival. The following edited transcript of that event presents some of the thoughts and experiences of a filmmaker willing to discuss his creative practice and achievements with an unusual degree of candidness, good humour and self-scrutiny.

Jonathan Murray (JM): *It's great to have you back at the [2009 Edinburgh International] Film Festival ... I think it's particularly apposite, in that it's the thirtieth anniversary of That Sinking Feeling's [world] premiere at Edinburgh, and indeed ... the buzz ... generated after [that] premiere starts your career off ... I wonder if you could say something about the situation from which That Sinking Feeling emerged, because in some ways it's a very fantastical comedic film ... but on the other hand, I think it's also quite clearly linked to the experiences and characters of the youth actors who you were working with at that time.*

Bill Forsyth (BF): Well, yeah, in my mind when I was working with the young folks [from the Glasgow Youth Theatre] the whole film was a fantasy, it was based on the fact that Ronnie, the main character, who is supposed to be the leader of the gang but is pretty hapless and hopeless at it, it's a dream that he has when he falls asleep in the park one day eating his cornflakes [viewers see Ronnie consume this foodstuff at various points, in one of *That Sinking Feeling's* numerous running jokes] and he wakes up and thinks, "Thank God that was just a dream"—but that's what the film was.

But it came about because I had gone to the Youth Theatre because I'd spent more than a decade working as a documentary sponsored film-maker in Glasgow. And we were desperate—I wasn't alone, there were a lot of colleagues in the small [local] film community that there was—

and we were all desperate to find some way into real filmmaking, as it were.¹ We all thought of ourselves as filmmakers, but we hadn't quite really done it, so I cooked up the idea of making a rom-com about football and young love: *Gregory's Girl*. I took that idea to the Youth Theatre, found out where they were, and thought it would be a good way to exploit young people and get to work with actors ... The process of actually funding *Gregory's Girl* was so long—it took about a year-and-a-half—that we made this in the huff, as it were. We made *That Sinking Feeling* in the huff when the BFI had turned us down. And I had built up so much energy with the young people that I had to kind of do something with it.

And it was also a kind of trade-off because ... they'd been very gracious with their time that they'd given me, and they taught me so much. I mean, these young folk taught me how to work with actors, and taught me what actors need. And they kind of set the template for the acting in my kind of filmmaking, because I kind of worked out that actors in my films, they don't have to act, they have to just *behave*, you know? And, if they act it kind of shows ... these kids taught me the difference between what acting and behaving is on the screen, because especially in this film, they were working from somewhere that they knew, somewhere that they belonged in, because not all of them, but a majority of them, were playing versions of themselves in [*That Sinking Feeling*]. They were unemployed, this was 1979—well, you can see the state of Glasgow—Glasgow just looked like that, we didn't have to fabricate that ... I was a bit of a desperado as well, because my documentary career had come to a bit of a halt. My working partner [Charlie Gormley] and I had split up then and he was doing his own thing, documentary-wise, and pursuing his own career, and so this was a do-or-die attempt from me when I was working with the kids: I knew that something would either come of it or nothing would come of it.

JM: *Another way in which That Sinking Feeling very quickly establishes a template—certainly, I think, in the minds of audiences and critics—is this association between you as a filmmaker and comedy. But it strikes me that your approach to comedy is quite a distinctive and quite a multi-layered one ... I get the impression that in your films, you use comedy a lot, not as an escape from things that are serious or depressing, but as a different way to tackle them.*

BF: It's a way of discussing them really, I suppose. And it's not my invention: it's not something I can claim as mine, really. I'm sure it's the same in other cities, it's something [that is] in the culture of Glasgow: it really is. It's the comedy of adversity, or whatever. In New York it's associated with the Jewish community and gallows humour, all of that stuff. It's just the comedy of how you deal with the situations that you're in. And the darker they get, I suppose, the funnier they get; the more the difference is between the situation and the joke you make of it, the funnier it is. I used to speculate about getting to a point where it's like this mythical thing: the ultimate joke that you can't actually laugh at, because it's just brushing up against its own reality so closely that you can't actually laugh at it. So it's just there, it was just there for the taking, really, that kind of humour. I think I did carry it with me: I think I took it on and developed it in the other films and did other things with it, but it just started from the ground, really.

JM: *You mentioned that the script for Gregory's Girl was actually written before That Sinking Feeling, and that you had a couple of fruitless years trying to get it funded at the British Film Institute ... Gregory's Girl does seem like a much more obviously upbeat and optimistic film than That Sinking Feeling was. In some ways it's almost emphasised, because you have many of the same actors again, and you see them playing very deprived kids in the first film and very cosseted ones in the second; young people who can't get a job are replaced by a young man who can't get a lay.*

BF: Exactly. This was really where I was coming from to begin with, in terms of wanting to make a film. It was *very* calculated. In a funny way, going to the Youth Theatre kind of brought me to heel a bit, because I realised that there were other things out there. I figured if I was going to make a cheap feature film that things like (especially in Scotland) football, working with young people—that was another thing, because they would be cheap and easier to handle, because I didn't know anything about actors—I figured that there was a decent combination in there. Plus, I had this idea that making a film in Scotland, which had never really been done before at that local level, I kind of figured ... there's five million people in the country: suppose only just half of them went, that's two-and-a-half million, you know?

So I thought we were onto a real winner. It was a very calculated thing: it really was a kind of rom-com exercise—in my mind, anyway. I'm not saying cynical, but quite calculated. And the more I got to know the young people from the Youth Theatre, the less cynical it probably became, because I actually started to pick up things from them and the way they were living and the way they were relating to each other. I slightly imposed things on them, because I was at school in the early Sixties and I was maybe imposing the situation I remember from school, where you really had to be a real cool dude to even get near the girls. Whereas, even when I was working with the Youth Theatre people in the late Seventies, it was that thing that we've got now, where boys and girls just mingle and mix and a girl can have a friend who's not a boyfriend, but a friend, and vice versa, all of that stuff. But anyway, I had to slightly impose [my school experience] on them because even they were beyond that at that point.

JM: *I guess [Gregory's Girl] is probably a film—well, speaking for a local audience—that still makes a big impression on people because ... apart from the fact that there is no history of native (or indigenous, call it what you will) feature filmmaking in Scotland really prior to [your first*

two] films, I think the image of the country, which is very everyday, I mean, you recognise things, you think, 'That looks like my street, those people talk like I do, they do the kind of things in their spare time that I do'. It's not the kind of slightly kind of overblown gritty realist drama of No Mean City, and it's not the out-and-out fantasy of Brigadoon. Was that something you were very conscious of at the time?

BF: Maybe not conscious then, but I think I can rationalise it now. Because as I say, we'd spent years, I spent years, making these sponsored films and documentary films: they'd even made films about New Towns, in fact one of the very first jobs that I had, way back in '64 when I started, I remember going out with the cameraman and filming, when they were making that road just past Cumbernauld—the big diggers were out and all that—so I was in on the New Town thing, you know? It made me feel like it was mine to use, because we had spent most of the Sixties and Seventies doing our duty making these propaganda films.²

But [sponsored documentary filmmaking] got us everywhere— even think of *Local Hero*—that's how I was able, I was quite happy with the kind of issues in that. We knew the country pretty well, we knew the people at a kind of street-level or ground-level basis because we interfaced with people when we were working with them: fishing boats and sheep farms, and god knows what. So I think that made me comfortable with all of the things like New Towns, I wasn't like someone kind of dropping in from outer space and saying, "Oh, how do we present this thing called a New Town?" I was on the same level as it, and I think it made it easy for me to use it in a subtler way: it's there and it gradually reveals itself ... It was a little conceit of mine, the reason I wanted a New Town, was because I wanted the trees to be the same age as the kids. I wanted teenage trees, you know? Because it was kind of raw, it was a raw landscape.

JM: *I'm very interested in your ideas about how you use all [the] resources of cinema: the things you can do with image, sound, light ... the fireworks we routinely see conjured up on the screen by filmmakers. I think one of the interesting things about what you do is that you're very often very restrained. There's not often moments ... when the audience is aware that you're doing something, it's much more understated and implicit.*

BF: It goes back to the old bread-and-butter documentary filmmaking. I always imagined myself as a guy in a tweed jacket with leather patches and a pipe, that's the kind of filmmaker I saw myself as, you know?

JM: *I certainly think watching your films, and also reading some of the things that you've said in interview about them over the years, that you seem to be very aware, but also very wary of, cinema's potential to be manipulated. It's this really overwhelming sensory experience, and you can make audiences behave like laboratory rats, almost.*

BF: I know. I've probably been a bit too uptight about it, but I'm a very retiring kind of person, so I don't go out of my way to manipulate people—I don't think, anyway—and so it's just a kind of natural thing for me. And also, it might be an early experience of cinema, because I didn't really take to cinema when I was young, because of that. I even remember going to kids' cinema and not liking that—I only went once or twice—because they kind of herded you around, you know? So yes, I've certainly avoided the tram-line manipulation of cinema. But ... I don't think there are too many filmmakers who would consciously, kind of crassly, follow that thing. But it's just the convention, you know?

And the other convention is that you've got a story, so something changes between the beginning and the end of the film, and that's always something I've had trouble with accepting,

because I don't latch on to this narrative idea, either of life or cinema. We're in the middle of something, but who's to say that the end of it is going to be any different or better than the start of it? To me, it seems a kind of dishonesty, really, in film-making. It's almost like a kind of propaganda, and I resent it a little bit ... that's what cinema, the kind of industrial cinema we're all embedded in, that's the way it seems to want to operate. It's almost as if it's telling us this slight lie, almost as if it's trying to give us some kind of pill, you know?³

JM: *That absence of technical manipulation in your films is quite remarkable, if I may say, in terms of allowing the viewing audience space to engage with them and make them whatever they want it to mean to them, rather than being pushed down a little cul-de-sac or blind alley of your choosing.*

Another major thing in the films that interests me in this regard is the way in which they end, which brings us onto your attitude towards storytelling and narrative in cinema. Or maybe it would be better to say, the way the films don't end. I think they very often tend to stop, or they finish in quite surprising and disorientating and thought-provoking ways. Maybe the most vivid exemplification of this might be the ending of your third film, Local Hero: I always think that ending is almost like a cinematic Rorschach Test ... and it strikes me that that's a recurring characteristic in all your movies. The endings are ambiguous, they invite further thought, they don't provide any particularly easy answers ... It seems that the endings of all your movies are very, very open, as if telling and tying up a story is not the main thing you're interested in.

BF: That's a shame, because I always try really hard to give a really good ending! I always think, "Hey, I've pulled it off this time, I've got an ending," but you're saying that I haven't. I don't know, it's just not something that grabs me, really, is to kind of tie something up. And I

kind of think, you know, it's something more you can give to an audience, it's just to say, "well, take that away with you and maybe on the bus home something else will strike you about it," but I don't know. That's what I used to enjoy about cinema, it was the bus ride home. It wasn't, you know, standing there watching the credits, it was what was going to happen to me afterwards, having watched the movie. So I think I was always trying to stay loyal to that.

JM: *Is it true that the financiers of Local Hero, for instance, wanted a much more unambiguous, much more clear-cut ending where Mac either refuses to leave Scotland or he flies back immediately?*

BF: Well, first of all, the ending that they saw and the ending that they previewed in America didn't have that phone box on it. The phone box is the compromise. It just ended with Mac on his balcony and it faded out and that was it. The only thing we had to go out on was Mark Knopfler's music,⁴ which was suitably swelling because the producer had made sure it swelled at the right moment.

So I thought that was the battle won, but the people at Warners, they didn't have any say really over the matter, they were just buying the film [for North American distribution], but they kindly suggested they would finance a reshoot of the ending where Mac changed his mind and jumped off the chopper and—I don't know quite *what* he would do then. David Puttnam, the producer, we were in Seattle at that preview and he kind of gave me the challenge, he said, "Look, they want to do this; we want them to promote the movie. We want to keep them sweet, in other words. So, unless you can come up with something, we're going to have to give them something." So it was really overnight and on the way to the airport that I had thought of using this little clip that I knew we had, which was from a shot where [Mac and fellow Knox Oil

employee Oldsen] arrive in town at the beginning of the film. And I thought of putting the [sound of] the phone box on it, so I told them this little story in the limo going to the airport and it bought them off for that time. And then we went back and we re-cut it in and all that.

But I'm still not 100%, I don't know whether it works or not: can you imagine [*Local Hero*] without that now? I don't know. Would it work? What does it do? I not sure what it does, whether it raises a wee moment of hope. In a way, it could be even more bleak, the fact that all he's got is a telephone number, you know? I think at the time I thought through it and I thought, "Yeah, they think they're buying something sweeter here but maybe they're not." Basically, we did that ending and it existed for two or three people in Warner Bros, that's all. Nobody else cared one way or the other. But if *they* thought they had bought a happier, a sweeter ending then that's fine. But I'm, as I say, I don't know who won or who lost. I don't know whether the audience lost. Do you feel you're being manipulated by that ending? That's the acid test for me.

JM: *Would it be fair to say that you're at least as interested in your films in observing things as you are in telling stories? They all have very strong situations and relationships between characters that are thought-provoking, that can be funny, that can be disturbing. And very often we get to sit in and look at those situations and the way people interact with each other, the way they relate to their world, for two hours. But as you say, there's no Road to Damascus moment at the end where things change or are magically improved or solved.*

BF: I think I probably go about them in a way that brings that out, because, you know, I've heard all this talk about how [screenwriters] have an idea, and they have a situation, and they concoct a few characters, and then there's a certain point when the characters seem to be telling their own story and making the moves on their own and speaking their own words. I think possibly when

I'm writing, that's kind of the same thing that happens. It's not as if ... I kind of think up a big story and then drag the characters through it. There is a point, after one or two situations have been set up, where that happens to me. I actually think, "Well, what's Mac going to do now?" and he kind of plays out what he's going to do and the other characters fit in with that. So I suppose it's almost like a little human experiment that's going on when I'm writing these things.

JM: *You've used that phrase 'industrial cinema,' and I suppose in industrial cinema, which is an incredibly efficient storytelling mechanism, you're not allowed to follow a character where he or she might go because there needs to be a conflict on page thirty of the script, something needs to be resolved on page sixty, we need a late cliff-hanger on page seventy-five. Your films seem to either ignore or trample across most of those rules.*

BF: I've never grasped that. I mean, I've haven't tried consciously, I haven't bought the [screenwriting theory] books or anything, I've tried to understand even the three-act thing, and I don't quite get that at all. Talking about conflict, I remember Iain Smith, who was Line Producer on *Local Hero*, I was feeding him some script pages even before I sent them to [David] Puttnam when I was starting to write it, because Iain was a friend, and I sent him about twenty or thirty pages and we were talking on the phone, and he said, "It's coming on fine, but there's no cornflakes in it." I said, "Yeah well, I'm getting away from cornflakes, you know, I had cornflakes in a couple of the other films: it's not going to be a thing [that becomes a recurring motif]." And he said, "No: *conflict*. I'm talking about conflict." That was when I was suddenly informed that conflict was good in movies and it was like a light bulb coming on, I hadn't even thought of that before. I'd managed to make two films without conflict: cornflakes, but no conflict. But it did make me think, and that's when I think I probably thought up the old guy, the

old Fulton Mackay character [Ben Knox, the beachcomber who is the one Highland villager who refuses to sell out to Knox Oil in *Local Hero*] and all that stuff: maybe that was the conflict.

JM: *[Mackay's character] persuades the Texan multimillionaire played by Burt Lancaster [the character Happer, Mac's boss and owner of Knox Oil] of the error of his ways. But even then, we don't get to see that conversation, we don't get to see their values or their ideas about the place [i.e., the threatened village of Ferness] clash. We're kind of left outside this little shack that they do it in, and we can only wonder as to what's discussed.*

BF: Well, that played out quite okay, I think, in terms of the story because the way I talked myself into it was the idea that power is always a mysterious thing and you never see it in operation: you just get the results of it, you know? But the main reason was [that] I couldn't actually think what they would be saying to each other. And I thought, in three pages I'm not ever going to do this convincingly. And the other thing is, if you're cutting in and out [between the inside of the shack in which Ben and Happer negotiate and the beach outside where Mac and the locals wait to hear their fate] and just having silly wee lines between them, that's not going to work, either. So I just withdrew and did it that way. Now I don't know whether a conventional film, or a more conventional film, would have dealt with that. Maybe not, because it would be a big thing to reveal that, the nuts and bolts of these two characters.

JM: *I think you feel that particularly with the earlier films. I mean, those first three, I always think of them as ensemble pieces: there's a huge number of characters and some of them, again going back to the ways in which you flout or ignore classical convention, sometimes the minor characters, the ones we only see for two or three minutes, seem far more clued up, or purposeful, or attractive than the main one, and yet we're left to imagine where it is that they go. We get*

little glimpses of all the different people that populate [these] world[s], and a sense that you could make several different films if you just chose to focus on one character rather than another.

BF: I don't know, I suppose that's just my ignorance, not to be too cute about it. But it really boils down to that, because if I had been, say, brought up inside—if I'd been an American filmmaker, for instance—and I had been brought up inside the whole American culture of watching films with a hero ... the cowboy hero and all that, it would probably be a genetic thing that I would do, I would just pick a character and follow him and have everyone else be in some kind of relationship with him, and that would be it. But never having been that, or never having absorbed enough film to take that on board, it just turns out [to be] the way that I do it: I can't explain it any more than that.

JM: *I want to move now to your fourth feature film, Comfort and Joy ... I think I'm right in saying that when Comfort and Joy was released in cinemas in 1984, the tagline that was used on the posters was "A Serious Comedy." Was there a conscious attempt in that film to move more towards that "comedy of the situation" that you talked about earlier, rather than the full-frontal gag-based stuff that also leavens the earlier films? Because [Comfort and Joy] was certainly seen at the time as ... a surprisingly dark film for you to make, and you get a sense of quite a lot of disorientation, even disappointment, in some of the contemporary reviews.*

BF: Once again, I didn't really know any better. I didn't know that if you make comedies, you're kind of flagging up to the world—or to the critical world, anyway—that you don't have to be taken all that seriously ... I ... always knew my kind of serious intent in all films that I had done, and I hadn't seen it coming back at me in any way [within contemporary critical

responses], in any kind of acceptance of it. So maybe I just set out to make a slightly more serious film—you know, *emotionally* serious—about a more serious kind of human situation [the psychologically shattering aftermath of an unexpected romantic bereavement], and I just kept the jokes in it.

But I'm still not sure how that pans out, because to my mind, you can do that, fine ... even in *That Sinking Feeling* we had felt the right to use comedy for any means that we wanted. Because we were all kind of—the kids and I—we were in that situation to some extent or another. So I didn't feel any difference between using comedy and trying to be serious. I know some people have talked about [*Comfort and Joy*] walking a tightrope, but I've never quite understood it. I think people are, you know, generous enough to be able to take the odd serious situation and humour together. It seems a very artificial difference to make.

JM: *I suppose [it's that idea] about things being so painful that you have to laugh at them, or you laugh at them but you realise they're sore. [Central character] Dickie's situation in Comfort and Joy is a very depressing one.*

BF: Yes, but other filmmakers have worked with comedy and humour all at once ... the thing that I'm slightly disappointed [with] now in the film is, I was so naïve about this Ice Cream War thing ... the whole thing, it wasn't based on different flavours of ice cream, it was based on the fact that these ice cream vans were kind of drug pitches, they were peddling drugs through them, so they were really important outlets.⁵

Not that that would've helped the film, I don't think. The way it is, it's just maybe a little bit *too* fantastical, this idea that people are going to come to blows over ice cream, recipes for ice cream: I don't know. But then again, the whole thing is: could it have been happening in Dickie

Bird's head? It's a bit like Ronnie in [*That Sinking Feeling*]. There's no real evidence, to my mind, that Dickie Bird went through any of that. Maybe he followed the first ice cream van and then went home and thought about it, and had a bottle of whisky, and fell asleep, and a film is the result. It really pleases me to find that out, because I thought, as I said earlier, I thought I was a really kind of nuts-and-bolts kind of film-maker, and to find out that I actually made things which are in their own way fantastical or maybe don't actually touch the ground the ground in some ways, it's cheered me up a bit to realise that.

JM: *You never see blood in the movie, it's always raspberry sauce and ice cream, and I suppose it could well be the fantasy of a slightly naïve and rather deranged individual.*

BF: Or someone who's just in that moment of bereavement, or whatever you want to call it, where you do slightly go off the rails. So maybe Hilary [Dickie's boss at the local radio station] is right, maybe [Dickie] has just lost it.

JM: *You think the joke when you watch [Comfort and Joy] as the film is panning out is that Hilary doesn't understand. But I guess after the film, the retrospective joke is that maybe Hilary is the one who understands all too well, and it's [Dickie] who's misguided.*

I know a film you've mentioned in relation to Comfort and Joy in some of the interviews at the time ... is Preston Sturges' 1940s movie Sullivan's Travels, which again I think does chime quite nicely, because it's a movie by a filmmaker who's got a reputation as a comedian, but a rather cerebral, serious one. And again, that's a film about how far you can take comedy, whether you can make people laugh but also take them to think about things they maybe wouldn't otherwise wish to consider at the same time. It seems to me that's quite a good way of thinking about what you've done in your movies, too.

BF: Well, he was a bit of a hero to us in the Sixties and Seventies, because his movies were coming on TV at that point ... you could see that he was—although he worked in Hollywood and he made, if you like, “studio” films—he was a bit of a maverick and you can see him pushing against the boundaries of the system ... we were always looking for heroes in that way. Most of them were French or German filmmakers, but it was nice to find someone in America who was pushing against the boundaries as well.

In the very early days, I remember my partner at the time, Charlie [Gormley], he was always trying to find out ways that we could educate ourselves and become filmmakers. And he had this idea that we should—it was before VHS, before you could even record a movie off the TV—and his idea was, we would actually just record movies on cassette, audio cassette, so you have the soundtrack, and somehow or other (I don’t know how Charlie thought it would work) this would educate us in timing gags and all kind of things. It never worked...

JM: *Your next three movies after Comfort and Joy are all made in the States, and it’s a very interesting and slightly less well-known period in your career ... we’ll move now to the film that takes you to America in the first place, Housekeeping, which is an adaptation of Marilynne Robinson’s 1981 novel [of the same name], the first time you’d directed a film which wasn’t from an original script written by yourself.*

I guess Housekeeping could be—and, indeed, by some people has been—written up as a departure for you in multiple senses: first film in America, rather than Scotland; first film that’s an adaptation, rather than an original script; first film that centres on female characters, largely, rather than men. But I get the sense watching it that actually, the themes that are tackled

here fit really nicely with your earlier work. Was it the case that you felt there was a real affinity with the sensibility in Marilynne Robinson's novel?

BF: Well, it's just that I kind of wanted to own her characters, really. That's what I identified with right away when I read the book. And one thing that pleases me about it was—you talked about all the differences between it and the earlier films—but I actually *instigated* it. Well, somebody told me to read the novel, I read the novel and wanted to own it, wanted to possess it, wanted to have it. Because normally, up until then, I had—I'm sure a lot of people do, a lot of filmmakers do—you just steal little things from novels, you know, here and there and adapt them and change them: this situation, or a word, or a character, or whatever.

But here I wanted the whole lot, so I had to go out and cough up for it, as it were. So it was different. Also, I had such respect for the novel, and such love of the book and its language, that I really just wanted to, in a sense, promote the novel as well as to make a film from its material ... I used to call the film a promo for the novel ... I used to say to people, "If you can do one thing, watch the movie or read the book, [then] read the book." Because that's the other thing—the experience of adapting [*Housekeeping*], once again, it teaches that thing about cinema: it was an exercise in reduction. I was taking things out, virtually just adapting by reduction, not changing things too much. Because there was so much there, enough there, but it was throwing so much away. It just made me realise more and more just how—well, I don't know, is "limited" too strong a word to use about cinema? You know, *vis-à-vis* the novel, how simplistic it is in what it can present, and how limited it is in what it can present.⁶

JM: *I guess in some ways it must have been a very challenging book to adapt, and makes you think, as you say, about the differences between cinema and literature. The book is all first-*

person narration, so it all takes place in [central character] Ruth's head. She is remarkably shy; she never does or says anything in real life. We can only read the book because we are privy to what's going on [inside her psyche]. But it's hard to [capture] that in cinema. [Also,] much of the book takes place in darkness, which is a bit of a bummer.

BF: Well, that was it. I mean, in a page of the novel you would go from a description of the situation [the two teenage orphans Ruth and Lucille] were in, [then Ruth] would make a reference back to her dead mother or her grandfather ... the novel's taking you here, there and everywhere, so it was a real restraining act, turning it into a script. I had to, I had little envelopes, and I spent a long while trying to get into the book in a conventional way, just thinking about it. And it ended up I just had to take some scissors to it, I had to cut it into bits, and I put the chunks in different [piles]: "This is speculation, this is narration, this is history, this is real, acting scenes where people are playing, reacting to each other," and then reconstructed [the film] from that. I glued it together, really. It's the only time I've ever done that ... I've read the book quite recently again. It's one of these books that almost ... it just borders on the arch but it just gets away with it, tremendously. [Marilynne Robinson] walks a tightrope.

JM: *Can we talk a bit about your attitude to characterisation and characters in your films generally? Again, I suppose, it's maybe another facet of certain ideas about comedy: that it can only do so much when actually you're trying to exploit its full resources. Very often, people talk about you being interested in eccentric characters, and I think there's something a wee bit belittling about that. One of the things that I get about the character of Sylvie in Housekeeping is that she's gone beyond eccentricity: she's strange, she's completely Other ... It strikes me that [this] comes across in your movies a lot, [the idea] that people are really strange, and sometimes in quite frightening ways, when you think about it. If you look at the run from, say,*

Local Hero, *through* Comfort and Joy, *through to* Housekeeping: *those three films all feature central characters who may be completely mad, although it's not hammered home as an overt suggestion.*

BF: To me it was fairly clear from the novel that Sylvie was insane, or whatever. [But] even Christine [Lahti] who played her [in the film] saw her [as a kooky free spirit] ... but you wouldn't want [the actress] to play [the character] mad ... I left Christine alone with that idea, I didn't pursue it, saying, "Oh, this character's actually insane." But it gave it the danger and the darkness, and the film progresses, the police become involved, and [Sylvie and Ruth] have to take off into the night, as it were, and they set fire to the house. So they do some pretty strange things.

But that thing you were saying about unexplained behaviour as well: in the course of making the film, in the course of adapting it, it's the only time, because maybe it wasn't my original material, where I've actually included things in the script and filmed them when I didn't actually quite understand them ... but I just kind of shot [them] because I had faith in the fact that Marilynne Robinson had a good reason behind [them] ... I put my faith in Marilynne, as it were, rather than in my reading of the book.

JM: *I guess another thing about the characters in your films, and I wonder how this has impacted on how you work with actors ... is that very often the characters ... have a very tenuous sense of who they are or how the rest of the world sees them. They're not characters with a clear sense of motivation, they don't always think about what they're doing. In your experience, do actors look for that, those kinds of clichéd questions: Who am I? What's my motivation? Why do*

I behave in this way? What is it that I want? Because it strikes me that characters in your films never think about these things, for the most part.

BF: I think it's best ... even if you have to take a little round trip to talk an actor into having faith in his character, that you should do it. Because it's much better that they're grounded in the character, rather than that they're going off to play someone kooky or someone who doesn't know where they're coming from ... because I think everyone, no matter what their psychological, emotional situation is, they still feel that they've got their feet on the ground. So I think it's best, it's more authentic to work from that point of view: that every single character is coming from somewhere real, according to their lights, rather than do some kind of rhetorical version of someone who might be a little at sea for a moment or two.

Funnily enough, I remember on *Local Hero*, the young American [central character], he was just called "Mac" in the script ... and I quite liked that idea that he was an unidentifiable character, not much of a character ... one of the things that an actor would do, normally, in the course of three or four weeks—it might not strike them right away—but I was dreading [actor] Peter Reigert coming up to me one morning and saying, "What's my real name?" Because just for my own silly reasons, I didn't *want* [Mac] to have a real name and I even didn't want him to think he had a real name. But fortunately, [Reigert] never did ask me, so that was ok.

JM: *Speaking of real names and assumed names and false names, it's a motif that appears again in your next film, the second one that you made in America, Breaking In. Again [as with Housekeeping] it's [you] working with another writer, in the sense that it's an adaptation of a script by the filmmaker John Sayles. I don't know whether it's fair to say that it's the closest you've come to making a genre movie (it has affinities with the buddy genre). It's about an aged,*

very professional, very good safecracker, played by Burt Reynolds ... and he takes a young apprentice under his wing, as much as a surrogate parent as [he is] training him in the mysteries of this criminal craft ... I suppose the tension isn't really to do with the crime story, it's to do with whether these two guys are going to form some kind of lasting emotional connection. And ultimately, it seems that they perhaps don't.

So we have Housekeeping, which is utterly premeditated: you read the book ... you fall in love with the book, you option the book, and you go to America specifically to do that movie. It's not seen, as I understand it, as ... a longer-term career move. But then you stay accidentally, almost, for Breaking In?

BF: No, I was back home and it was quite some time later ... I suppose it came about because ... once again it was the characters, the two characters, that I wanted to possess. It was kind of an offer ... it was quite unusual in the sense that it was quite a low-budget film, but it was kind of set up: it was being self-financed by a small studio.

But the truth is they probably misunderstood me. It goes back to that thing we were talking about comedy and seriousness, because I suppose it happened more in America as well, the label just kind of stuck, the kind of charming, whimsical label stuck more than any other label in America for me. The John Sayles script, I think the film fairly represents the script, it was a fairly tough and realistic thing, the way that he always does. But I think the guys that wanted to make it, I think they probably thought that I would bring a lot more charm to it, and follow the buddy movie line more ... But I didn't actually know much about the buddy genre and how it was supposed to pan out, so that's how [*Breaking In*] panned out [in a diametrically opposed] way. But once again, it was the two characters that took my fancy ... it was an

interesting film to make [because of] the compromises involved in it, in a sense. As I say, it was quite a low-budget movie, but ... even for any amount of money [the financiers] wanted the works. They wanted a name, they wanted box office potential, they wanted *everything*.⁷

JM: *Was that the first time that you felt really nose-up to those [commercially motivated] pressures?*

BF: Well, yeah, but they weren't compromises ... I know there's a myth about this thing: going to Hollywood and being taken to pieces, and all of that of that. But it's not really true, because any filmmaker who works inside the system has these pressures daily. I don't care who you are ... eighty percent of filmmakers are probably quite happy to work in there at least some of the time, a lot of them most of the time. Some filmmakers are quite happy to go out and shoot four endings on the main shoot and then they'll pick the best one according to what the audience wants and all of that, that all goes on. So it's only for a slight outsider like me that these things become at all controversial, or whatever. But to my mind, it was quite a normal process because I knew all of these things would happen, I knew they would go on.

In terms of the film, I think ... the one big compromise was using a name actor [Burt Reynolds] to play the Ernie character [the aging safebreaker] ... The way I had conceived of [Ernie], he had reduced his life to such an extent that he almost had no existence at all. And he did it for the best of reasons, because he wanted to be totally anonymous and he lived a very monastic life ... so it's almost as if he doesn't have to go to jail, because he's delivered his own punishment to himself, he's reduced his life so much. And it was a very difficult act to pull off, having a name actor, a name film star, playing this virtual guy who turned himself into a mouse, a creature of the alleys. That was tough. But it was just the way that the financiers wanted it: we

had to have some kind of name or other. And Burt did a huge job in doing that. I actually had another actor lined up, John Mahoney, who at that time wasn't a name, he became more of a name in TV, in the *Frasier* series, he played ... the dad in that. But to my mind, an actor with much less of an identity would have made the film work on a different level.

JM: *We'll move now to your next film, Being Human ... one thing I've noticed you talked a lot about in interviews to this point in your career was being very aware of certain kinds of budget level that you felt that you could work at that were low enough that you would left to your own devices to do what you want[ed]: two or three million Pounds, and even the American films are cheap by studio standards.*

When we get to Being Human, suddenly it's a much bigger budget than you've worked with previously, and it's partly because the premise of the film is really quite audacious. We have five men who may (or may not) be the same person, or reincarnations thereof, all played by Robin Williams, [and] five periods through history, from prehistoric to modern-day ... I suspect Being Human is probably the biggest-budget, but also the least-seen, of [your] eight films.

BF: It certainly was a problematical film for a studio [i.e., main financiers Warner Bros.].⁸ I was actually talking to a producer on the phone who wanted me to make a film about—it was Bill Murray who had got me into this mess, because we were talking about working together and he put me in touch with these people—the premise was [that] Bill Murray was going to play this really bad guy, a kind of Mob heavy, who dies and goes to Hell, but it's not the right time for him, so he's got to come back ... So, I was trying to talk myself out of doing this on the phone ... and I said, "Well, I would have to have a sound reason if I had people changing bodies and things ... it would need to work on a different level for me." And suddenly, I had the whole idea

in my head: of one actor playing different characters ... so I worked on the idea from that point on.

Being Human makes me think of all the films [that I've made], and I seem to have got all these characters marooned somewhere or other in the same situation. It makes me feel quite good in a way, that there's some kind of through line in it all. The more I think about it, the more marooned characters I've got all over the place.

JM: *There does seem [in your work] to be an interest in people who are recognisably human, recognisably frail, who are not charismatic Übermensch ... another example of that [is] your eighth feature, Gregory's 2 Girls, a return to the character of Gregory from Gregory's Girl, a return to Cumbernauld ... and a film that, I think, contrary to what you might expect, is not to be described as a sequel, or at least, not a sequel in the classically understood sense.*

I guess one thing that's come up as we've looked back across your career is subversion of, or refusal to respect, established conventions in cinema, whether by design or sometimes just by instinct and accident. But it certainly seems to me to be very consciously intended in Gregory's 2 Girls, which isn't really a sequel at all ... the tone is harsher. To go back to Iain Smith's complaint about the lack of cornflakes/conflict [in your earliest features], dramatic conflict and the conflict of ideas is much more overtly and forcibly stated here ... when you made [Gregory's 2 Girls] was there an attempt to go back to the situation but then do something very different with it [and] to think about a different approach to your filmmaking as well?

BF: It wasn't something I instigated: I didn't come up with the idea of wanting to remake *Gregory's Girl*. I kind of rescued the project from Clive [Parsons], the original producer [of *Gregory's Girl*], who was making a TV series out of the original characters, and I got involved

in helping him write a pilot. And then I got a little bit possessive about it and said, “Why don’t we make a film ... rather than the TV thing?” So that’s how it started, it wasn’t something I was yearning to do.

But having decided to do it, it was of its time. This was kind of late ’90s, the New Labour showboat was on the waves, and all these ideas—the idea of local participative politics, issue politics, all of that—you either tied yourself to a tree or made sure you bought the right coffee ... and you felt you were doing something ... For me, [*Gregory’s 2 Girls*] was a kind of first-time political thing, if “political” means stating your point of view about the state of things, so that’s what it amounted to.

But, the other thing about it was, I began to catch in the wind the idea that making a sequel twenty-five years later was ... not a good sign. I could hear people saying, “Well, what’s wrong with him if he’s got to go back to twenty-five-year-old ideas?” So I was very determined to run a mile from the original, run as far from the original film as I could. It wasn’t a difficult thing to do, because as I say, I hadn’t set out to make any kind of carbon, updated [copy of the original]. So it suited me, and these ideas were in my head at the time, and the situation, the school with a teacher and all that, allowed me to play them out. At one level, I was quite consciously running from the original film and that’s why it had that flavour to it.

JM: *Do you have future plans to film again? It’s been ten years since the last movie.*

BF: Well, I’ve been doing things over the course of those ten years. I’ve been writing, mostly: I enjoy writing a lot. One thing that nearly came to fruition, but didn’t was—funnily enough, once again talking about marooned people—was a script for HBO about three guys in outer space, in a Mir spacecraft for six months ... I am working on something, and I won’t—I suppose you get

precious about these things—but I can't quite talk about it. If I talked about it, it would be like a treasure hunter revealing the grid reference of his shipwreck ... It's early days, and I'm enjoying writing it, and it's got a few surprises in it. I'm going into territory that I haven't been in before. I'm trying to do a wee genre thing, in a funny way. So maybe I've seen the light, after all. Maybe this is it: my big chance to be legitimate.⁹

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the unenviable circumstances of the Scottish filmmaking community during the 1970s, see Jonathan Murray, *Discomfort and Joy: The Cinema of Bill Forsyth* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 9-14.

² Forsyth had a fifteen-year-long career in sponsored documentary short filmmaking before directing *That Sinking Feeling*, and co-ran the small independent production company Tree Films with his close friend and collaborator Charlie Gormley between 1972 and 1979. The film that Forsyth recalls at this point in the interview is probably *The New Scotland* (Stanley Russell, 1965) a twenty-minute sponsored short on contemporary economic regeneration in the country's Central Belt region. For an extended examination of Forsyth's representation of the New Town narrative setting of *Gregory's Girl*, see Murray, *Discomfort and Joy*, pp. 49-64.

³ Forsyth's most extensive commentary on his approach to cinematic narrative can be found in Jonathan Hacker and David Price, 'Bill Forsyth', in Hacker and Price (eds.), *Take Ten: Contemporary British Film Directors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 106-145.

⁴ Knopfler, the lead singer, songwriter and guitarist for the band Dire Straits, composed the original soundtracks for *Local Hero* and Forsyth's subsequent feature, *Comfort and Joy* (1984).

⁵ The term 'Ice Cream Wars' refers to a notorious episode in early-1980s Glaswegian social history. Rival criminal cartels systematically used travelling vans selling ice cream as cover to introduce the dealing of hard drugs into many of Glasgow's most deprived areas and housing estates. For more detail, see Douglas Skelton and Lisa Brownlie, *Frightener: The Glasgow Ice-Cream Wars* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Press, 1992).

⁶ For extended discussions of Forsyth's *Housekeeping* in terms of literary adaption, see: Murray, *Discomfort and Joy*, pp. 131-159; Jonathan Levin, 'Making Shadows in the Dark: *Housekeeping*, from Page to Screen', in Barbara Tapa Lupack (ed.), *Vision/Re-vision: Adapting Contemporary American Literature by Women to Film* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press), pp. 101-126; Sheila Ruzycki O'Brien, 'Housekeeping: New West Novel, Old West Film', in Barbara Howard Meldrum (ed.), *Old West—New West: Centennial Essays* (Moscow, ID: University of Idaho Press, 1993), pp. 173-183; Erika Sprohrer, 'Translating from Language to Image in Bill Forsyth's *Housekeeping*', in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 34: 3 (2001), pp. 55-71.

⁷ The equivocal note Forsyth strikes in retrospect matches the tone of his public comments about *Breaking In* at the time of the film's original theatrical release: for more detail, see Philip Bergson, 'Just Bill', in *What's On* (September 5 1990), p. 75; William Green, 'The Forsyth Saga', in *The Sunday Telegraph*, 7 Days Section, (June 24 1990), pp. 21-23.

⁸ Forsyth comments at length on his difficult working relationship with Warner Bros. on *Being Human* in Allan Hunter, 'Being Human', in *Sight and Sound*, 4: 8 (August 1994), pp. 25-28.

⁹ The feature-in-progress that Forsyth refers to here had the working title of *Exile* in 2009. It remains in active development at the current time of writing in September 2014.